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REFLECTION ON THE THEOLOGY OF JOSEPH RATZINGER (POPE BENEDICT XVI)

ABSTRACT

This essay looks at ways in which the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, shows affinities with Reformation theological thought. Following a brief look at the background to my own interest in Ratzinger, I present some important features of his theology, shedding light on it particularly through drawing attention to those theological figures in the Christian tradition, Augustine and Bonaventure, who have influenced him the most. A brief treatment is then offered of how these theological forefathers are reflected in his work and, following this, Reformation “flavours” shown to have been present in his writings are traced, briefly, through examining three areas of his thought: ethics, his theology of political life, and ecumenism. The purpose of the article is to indicate, in an incipient way for an audience largely of the Reformed tradition, that Ratzinger is not as distant from their theological concerns as might easily be imagined.

An address that I was fortunate to have the opportunity to give to the Professors and students of the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, in July 2011, forms the background to this article on the theology of Joseph Ratzinger and its affinities with Reformation thought. Occasioning these reflections also is the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, which has led to a sprouting of conferences and commemorative lectures throughout the world – in Roman Catholic circles in particular. Joseph Ratzinger has been vocal, indeed controversial, among the Council’s main interpreters and much interest has developed in his theological views and in the main factors influencing them. Among these are his German origins, his

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upbringing and education in the land where the Reformation began, and his professorial work in Catholic theological faculties in several German universities side by side with colleagues in parallel Protestant faculties. Even a superficial glance at his writings leaves no doubt that this German-born theologian, whose “theology has always been in intense conversation with the Reformation traditions” (Neuhaus 1998), exhibits an interesting affinity with themes and concerns that are important to the Churches of the Reformation. My purpose here is to try to highlight some of these themes and concerns and thus indicate how this theologian, who is currently head of the Roman Catholic Church, is closer than one might expect to the heritage of the Reformation. A rhetorical question that is sometimes posed in English to indicate a lack of surprise is: “is the Pope Catholic?” But here I am asking: in what sense might the Pope be *Reformed*?!

1. WHY JOSEPH RATZINGER?

A biographical snippet might be helpful at the beginning. Over twenty-five years ago, in 1984, while trying to find a thesis topic for my licentiate degree in theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., I discovered an article by Erich Schrofner on grace and experience in Rahner and Boff. It stated that, while traditional theological treatments of grace – and even the theology of grace of Karl Rahner (1904-1984) – had had the *individual* as their main point of interest, the Brazilian Leonardo Boff’s theology of grace was marked, in a way that was, up to then, unknown in Catholicism, by the broader themes of history and society (Schrofner 1980: 272-278; Corkery 2005:49). Attracted by Boff’s emphasis (due to my own perception that many situations of sin and grace had obvious corporate dimensions), I wrote a licentiate thesis on the social-structural dimensions of grace and “dis-grace” in his theology and published the results of this study in a subsequent article (Corkery 1995).

While I was writing, Boff fell foul of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which issued, in 1985, a *Notification* on his book, *Church, Charism and Power* (1981), signed by Joseph Ratzinger, its Prefect. Boff’s book was about ecclesiology, not theological anthropology (my main interest), yet the *Notification* did lead me to examine the Congregation’s writings on liberation theology, above all its 1984 and 1986 *Instructions*. Cardinal Ratzinger wrote an article presenting (and defending) the “anthropological vision” of the latter, and I read that too (Ratzinger 1988). It was a short step, after that, to looking at his own anthropological vision; and this – with a consideration of his approach to salvation added – became the topic of my doctoral dissertation. The added soteriological focus was important

because Ratzinger had expressed concern that, in liberation theology, a rather materialist anthropology and a too-immanent notion of salvation went hand-in-hand (Corkery 2005:50)

and I wanted to see if this view could be upheld – or called into question! So my entry into his theological world was not born of some eirenic desire to bring together two conflicting streams in Roman Catholic theology but rather to get a handle on a very important “conversation” about salvation and humanity that was occurring in the church and in theology at the time.

Through my reading of Ratzinger, I quickly noticed how his dissertations in the 1950s on Augustine (354-430) and on Bonaventure (1221-1274) cast a good deal of light on his opposition to theological approaches that conferred primacy – or at least “equiprimacy” – on *praxis* (Ratzinger 1986(b):47-49, 72 and Corkery 2005:50, 2009(b):195-196). Ratzinger has always been uneasy about an emphasis on *praxis*, above all by liberation theology, with the Marxist background in its understanding of this term, and he cautioned, ever since he was a very young theologian, against the mentality that the future is “makeable” that he considers to be characteristic of the second phase of modernity, the so-called phase of technical rationality, with its arrogant attitude that we have it within our human power to build the future (Ratzinger 1969:34-39).

Ratzinger’s doctoral studies in the ecclesiology of Augustine and his *Habilitationsschrift* on the theology of history of the “medieval Augustinian”, Bonaventure, lent a flavour to his theology, from the outset, that made it sceptical of any human contribution to human well-being and aware of our utter dependence on God for all things. This awareness, echoing the story of Augustine’s own journey as he described it in his *Confessions*, a book that Ratzinger cherished since his earliest days as a student (Ratzinger 1998: 49), meant that he was always uncomfortable with an emphasis, typical of the “age of progress” (the 1960s) in which he lived as a young theologian, on the idea that we – sinners in need of God’s mercy at every moment – could do anything without the help of God. If we were to make any progress at all, such progress would be a gift, not a product of the “making” capacities of the over-confident, arrogant “man of the future” (Ratzinger 1969:36-37, 1970:81-83). A polemic against such a mentality of “making” (“makeability”) runs right through Ratzinger’s theology, conscious as it has been from the beginning that being a *receiver* is the hallmark of Christian existence (Ratzinger 1964:1157, also Schindler 1987:270). All of these emphases indicate, surely, an affinity in his thought for many of the central concerns of the Reformers, and of Martin Luther in particular. This affinity, disputed by few, is noted by several. Some years ago, Richard John Neuhaus, a Lutheran pastor in New York who

became a Roman Catholic in 1990,¹ heard the melody of the Reformation text *simul iustus et peccator* sounding in the writings of Ratzinger and saw also the influence of the Reformers' *sola gratia*. He detected a degree of convergence between his thought (also Pope John Paul II's) and "the cardinal points of the Reformation" that he suspected might even surprise the two of them (Neuhaus 1987:32-35). As we delve more deeply into Ratzinger's theology, we shall see that, certainly in his case, Neuhaus was not so wide of the mark!

2. RATZINGER'S THEOLOGY: A DEEPER LOOK

Joseph Ratzinger, born in 1927, had completed his doctoral and *Habilitation* dissertations by the age of thirty and found himself an expert advisor (*peritus*) to Cardinal Frings of Cologne at the Second Vatican Council while still only in his mid-thirties.² Like most Roman Catholic theologians at that time, Ratzinger looked with high expectations to the Council's aftermath, but these expectations had their own distinctive flavour. This is evident from his writings that emerged very soon after the Council. Writing in the Irish pastoral journal, *The Furrow*, in 1967 – this was a talk that he had given the previous year at the *Katholikentag* in Bamberg – he let it be clearly seen that the aftermath of the Council was not delivering what he had been hoping for from that great event and his dissatisfaction with developments since its completion was based on theological sentiments that would not be alien to Christians of Churches of the Reformation, as we shall see.

Recalling, at Bamberg, how the Council had sought to give a more positive formulation to the relationship between the world and the Church (in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*) than had hitherto been the case in the Roman Catholic Church,

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- 1 Neuhaus, Lutheran pastor and son of a Lutheran pastor, saw much in the theology of Ratzinger (and John Paul II) that was congenial to the Lutheranism in which he had been raised. The ecclesiology he adopted on becoming a Roman Catholic clearly marked him as different from the Christian he had formerly been, but, as one writer quoted of him when reviewing his book, *Catholic Matters*, in the *New York Times* (April 16, 2006): as the son of a Lutheran pastor, he (this is N. on himself) "came to know the utterly gratuitous love of God by which we live astonished."
 - 2 For the first session of the Council (autumn 1962), Ratzinger was the personal advisor of Frings; for the remaining three sessions (1963-1965), he was an official theological (expert) advisor. He enjoyed this role with his colleague, Hans Küng (who would invite him to a professorship at Tübingen after the Council). Michael Schmaus, Munich's best known dogmatic theologian at the time, referred derisively (jealously?) to the two as "teenage theologians".

Ratzinger noted that there was much at stake in this intention and he indicated that, on the theological level, it had led to a development that occurred in two phases: what he called “the incarnatory phase”, in a first move, and “the eschatological phase”, in a subsequent unfolding (Ratzinger 1967:15-16). Of the first he became quite critical, for while it may have given rise “to a humane, vital, outgoing Christianity, an Incarnation-oriented Christianity” that enabled a joyful embracing of all that was good in the world, it overlooked – as was soon noted by theological reflection (Ratzinger does not specify whose!) – that

the idea of the Incarnation by no means enjoyed that absolute pride of place in the Scriptures which it was now coming to assume in Catholic spirituality (Ratzinger 1967:16).

Ratzinger pointed out that it was with profession of faith in the Resurrection that Christian faith began and theological reflection had then extended back

firstly to emphasis on the word of the historical Jesus (the Synoptics) and finally to emphasis on the idea of the Incarnation (John) (Ratzinger 1967:16).

Thus incarnation had come last, not first, in New Testament thinking and seeing it “as antecedent to the idea of the Resurrection, which in turn is inseparable from the idea of the Cross” (Ratzinger 1967: 16) was a late New Testament development. Recognition of this, Ratzinger said, restrained “that joyous outgoing approach to the world which came from thinking purely in terms of the Incarnation” (Ratzinger 1967:16) and it is clear from his talk that he welcomed such restraining and anything that further supported it. It is surely congenial to Christians of the Reformed traditions that much of his nervousness about an Incarnation-centred Christianity came from his view that, in the emphasis it was being given, it lacked Scriptural backing and that Ratzinger favoured an emphasis on the paschal mystery – on the Resurrection, and on the Cross that is inseparable from it – not least because it was his view that this enjoyed a better foundation in the Scriptures. Thirty years later, according primacy to the Scriptures was still prominent in his mind: “If we are theologians and believers, we listen first to what the Bible says” (Ratzinger 1997:187).

There were other reasons also, close too to the Reformation’s heart, for Ratzinger’s particular viewpoint. One could have seen these by examining his earlier writings on the relationship between the divine and the human (envisaged in terms such as: grace and nature, Church and world, or the sacred and the secular). In 1961, writing on nature and grace, he had already taken a line in relation to the human – to our created reality – that

took account of the Reformed critique of the over-optimistic approach to nature characteristic of Catholic theology (drawing on its Thomistic heritage). This line he had inherited from his Munich professor and mentor, Gottlieb Söhnngen. As I pointed out in my 2009 book on Ratzinger:

Söhnngen's writings on the analogy of being and the analogy of faith sought to do justice to Karl Barth's critique of a superficially-held optimism about nature that liked to base itself on Thomas Aquinas's positive concept of nature. Söhnngen had attempted to hold fast to the biblically-based seriousness of the Reformed critique, while at the same time not giving up the claim of creation-faith, which Catholic theology expresses in a yes to the ontological dimension. Ratzinger said that he would follow the same basic direction (Corkery 2009:45; see also Ratzinger 1973:161).

He did. It is not surprising, then, that as the Council and its aftermath struggled with finding the correct balance between a theology of the incarnation and a theology of the Cross, Ratzinger placed his theological support decidedly in the latter space. This was not only in evidence in his 1966 talk at Bamberg; it lay at the heart of his celebrated book, *Introduction to Christianity*, delivered as lectures in 1967 and published shortly afterwards, making him famous due to its enormous international success (Ratzinger 1969). His fellow German theologian and colleague, Walter Kasper, praised in particular the two christological chapters of this book, pointing out that, in them, Ratzinger had succeeded in delivering a variety of valid new christological interpretations, among which (Kasper mentioned) was his drawing out of the dynamic of the theology of the cross in contradistinction to a one-sided and static theology of the incarnation. Nor was Kasper the only one to refer to the Cross-orientation of Ratzinger's theological work. Another reviewer, Hubertus Mynarek, writing in the same place, made the same point (Kasper 1969:184, also Mynarek 1969:182).³

Thus, as Ratzinger's thinking unfolded, it became clearer that his theological leanings were very close to what he had referred to as "the eschatological phase" in his Bamberg talk. His emphases on closeness to the Scriptures and attentiveness to the Reformed critique of human nature were joined to other Reformation-congenial emphases also, which more or less naturally followed on from the two already mentioned. Foremost among these was the centrality of *conversion* in Christian life (Ratzinger 1987 and 1973(b):70). Knowing that as creatures we owed everything to God and – above all, as sinners – that we stood as "beggars" (Augustine) before him, Ratzinger was always deeply conscious that we could do

3 Mynarek speaks of Ratzinger's work (in relation to that of Teilhard de Chardin) as a "theology more oriented to the Cross of Christ."

nothing to help ourselves (Ratzinger 1973(c):123 and Corkery 2009:38-39). Without “help from outside” (Ratzinger 1985: 81), we were doomed because the “compass” of nature, so smudged by the history of sin, could no longer be steered by with confidence in our search for the right way to live (Corkery 2009:41-42). Thus, for Ratzinger, the grace of God had to be, first and foremost, *healing* because our concrete humanity was, first and foremost, sinful. This has always been his emphasis. Hence, for him, grace does not so much *build* on nature created “good” (*pace* Aquinas and an optimistic tradition of “elevating grace”) as *reverse* it (following a more sin-aware tradition rooted in Augustine). The *discontinuities* between nature and grace and the fact that the latter is much more a healing than an elevating divine gift are obvious, given our condition (Corkery 2009:44). And, again taking guidance from his mentor, Gottlieb Söhngen, whose approach to the relations between grace and nature stays close not to the Thomistic side of the medieval Scholastic tradition but rather to the Bonaventurian (and Augustinian), Ratzinger’s theological anthropology follows broadly in the same line (Fiorenza 2005:61). It seems evident to me that this emphasis places him (and Söhngen before him) markedly closer to the Reformation than to Thomas (and certainly to the various “Thomisms” that succeeded him).

These emphases in Ratzinger’s theology of grace cause him to be decidedly christocentric. The “help from outside,” the help that we cannot give ourselves but that we need if we are to be restored to what God intended us to be – relational, for others, following the pattern of Jesus’ own life – can only come from Jesus Christ. He is “all relationship, all ‘exodus’, all self-outpouring love” (Corkery 2009:42). Only he, “as the being-of-relation *par excellence*, the ‘exemplary’ human, can lead us back to love” (Corkery 2009:42).⁴ He alone points the way back to God, re-placing us on the road to our true humanity. Ratzinger’s focus here is entirely christocentric (echoing Bonaventure in particular, as I have said). The route to be taken is the *paschal* one. The way of grace does not bypass sin and forget the Cross. In earlier writing, I put it like this:

With Jesus Christ, the second (or ‘last’) Adam, the head of a new humanity, a new incarnation begins (Ratzinger 1969:211, 1966:60). He is not some special case of the human being but rather the *exemplary* human being in whom God’s intention for humanity fully comes to light (Ratzinger 1969:175-176). He is the restored image of God (Ratzinger 1979:47), ‘the revelation and the beginning of the definitive mode of human existence’ (Ratzinger 1987[b]:187), the complete answer to the question ‘what is the human being?’

4 Here Corkery is drawing on Ratzinger 1969:133-137, 155-156 and 175-182; also on Ratzinger 1990:445-450.

(Ratzinger 1995:48). In him, the second, the definitive Adam (1 Cor. 15: 44-48; Col. 1: 15), we are shown what it really is to be human; and we see that, with creation – the first Adam – a preliminary sketch, a rough draft, was given, which means that we are beings *en route*, not yet ourselves, but transitioning to what we are to become, as this is revealed in the second Adam (Ratzinger 1995:48-49).

Here suddenly ‘the Easter mystery, the mystery of the grain of wheat that has died’ (Ratzinger 1995:49) appears in our midst, Ratzinger says, because it is only by entering upon Christ’s wheat-grain existence, upon his path of dying and rising, that we will reach the goal revealed in him. The paschal mystery, the life-pattern of the last Adam, must be our life-pattern too; for it is the authentic mode of existence of every human being (Ratzinger 1995:49 in Corkery 2009:43).⁵

The path of the Christian will be the same as that of Christ: walking the paschal way, bearing the Cross, dying to self. Conversion and being forgiven reveal themselves as central; this is the Christian way. Ratzinger’s emphasis on these – on the Cross of Christ and on grace understood fundamentally as healing – is extremely significant; and it is not the typical emphasis of many Roman Catholic theologians. It is closer, rather, to Reformed theology. This should not surprise because Joseph Ratzinger, as a university professor in Germany, has, for many years, plied his theological trade side-by-side with colleagues from neighbouring theology faculties on the Evangelical-Protestant side; I think of Bonn, Münster and Tübingen especially, covering the ten-year period from 1959 to 1969 (Corkery 2009:64). He is very knowledgeable about, and quite sympathetic towards, Martin Luther (Ratzinger 1997:159).⁶ It has been said that, without his profound involvement, the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* would never have been achieved.⁷ So, by now I hope I am beginning to show you some of the ways in which Ratzinger may be deemed a Reformation-friendly theologian – and why. I shall make this a little more visible in the remaining parts of this paper by, first, looking just a little more at his theological roots and their effects. Then, drawing on his Reformation-echoing polemic against *works*, I shall explore the influence of this on: (1) his approach to ethics and to living the Christian life; (2) his manner of handling the relationship between politics and theology, as this revealed itself in his disputes with liberation theologians in the 1980s; and (3) the way in which he deals with the matter of the unity of the Christian

5 In the original text the bracketed references within the quotation were endnotes.

6 Here – in addition to “negative aspects” – he speaks of the “many positive things” that “Luther brought into German history.”

7 See The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church 1999.

Churches (and “ecclesial communities”, as he would surely add in his all-too-careful manner!).

3. THEOLOGICAL ROOTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE⁸

In an article after Ratzinger’s election as Pope, a former student of his, the North American, Francis Fiorenza, referred to an early essay by him on nature and grace in which he had taken the line (thus Fiorenza)

that the focus upon grace perfecting nature should not overlook the cross of Christ and should not neglect that grace also challenges and stands in critique of nature (Fiorenza 2005:61).

Towards the end of the essay, Ratzinger had attempted a brief synthesis. In it he pointed out that that which is genuinely human in us, while it was

completely extinguished in no one, was also unadulteratedly present in nobody, but rather had become ‘pasted over by the dirty covering that Pascal once aptly called the *seconde nature* of the human being’ (Corkery 2009:45 drawing on Ratzinger 1973:178).

Here he was pointing to our twilight character: still bearing the image of God from our creation, on the one hand, yet this image had become utterly marred and obscured, on the other hand. As such it needed reversal, transformation. But even if it did not, Ratzinger, following Bonaventure, might still have remained cautious about ascribing too much to it. This is because Bonaventure, lacking the creaturely optimism of his colleague, Thomas Aquinas – although in his writings he did attempt to accord a certain excellence to human nature (Ratzinger 1963) – found himself nervous of over-ascribing to nature what might properly be due to God and tended, in the end, towards a certain collapsing of nature into grace for fear that he might otherwise be guilty of eclipsing the divine at the expense of the human (Ratzinger 1963:495, 1973:173).

Thus Bonaventure pulls back from ascribing excellence to the human and prefers to emphasise instead human dependence, indebtedness and nothingness.⁹ The interesting thing is – these same emphases are found also in Ratzinger (as they were in Augustine): we are beggars, receivers, capable of very little. Avery Dulles pointed to Ratzinger’s Augustinianism when writing about the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, which Pope John Paul

8 The treatment in these two pages will be very short; for a more satisfactory account, see Corkery 2009:44-49.

9 See, for example, St Bonaventure 1963: Part V, chapter 2, paragraph 3; also Part III, chapter 1, paragraph 3.

It had convened to assess the achievement of the Second Vatican Council on the twentieth anniversary of its ending. Of two schools of thought present at the Synod, Dulles said, the first, “supernaturalistic” in viewpoint, tended “to depict the church as an island of grace in a world given over to sin;” he called this outlook “neo-Augustinian” (Dulles 1988:191). Dulles spoke of those who had this supernaturalistic outlook as considering that the world had fallen under the power of the Evil One, that collaboration with it was less to be recommended than taking a stance against it and that the Church had become contaminated by the world in the years following the Council (Dulles 1988:191). It is not difficult to recognize these sentiments in Ratzinger, who responded as follows to a question about “restoration” that was put to him in the year that the Extraordinary Synod took place:

If by ‘restoration’ is meant a turning back, no restoration of such kind is possible...But if by *restoration* we understand the search for a new balance after all the exaggerations of an indiscriminate opening to the world, after the overly positive interpretations of an agnostic and atheistic world, well, then a *restoration* understood in this sense....is altogether desirable and, for that matter, is already in operation in the Church (Ratzinger 1985:37-38).

This is a typical Ratzinger response. The world contaminates. Purification, about-turn, de-contamination are needed. Today he says that Europe needs this because what Europe is experiencing is ultimately a crisis of faith. With Augustine, Ratzinger sees sin, ultimately, as loss of faith in God (Corkery 2009:39, 147). Faith is its antidote, *fides purgans*, faith that purifies, converts, turns us towards God and away from what is ungodly. It is a gift, un-manufacturable by us, bestowed through encounter with Jesus Christ. It is through encounter with him, not through any efforts of our own, that we are purified, forgiven, freed. This is Joseph Ratzinger at his best. But does it not also echo Luther’s (and Calvin’s) repudiation of the doctrine of salvation by works and does it not echo, furthermore, the recent summing up by Professor Ruth Whelan of Jean Calvin’s pastoral theology as “the unconditional mercy of God” (Whelan 2010: 40)?

4. *FAITH AND WORKS: ETHICS, THEOLOGY OF POLITICS, ECUMENISM*

4.1 Ethics and living the Christian life

The saving encounter with Jesus Christ, emphasized by Ratzinger perhaps not in classical evangelical language but in his stress on the fact that

Christian life begins with conversion, reveals other aspects of his theology that show its closeness, also, to Reformation concerns. It has been observed that Ratzinger eschews “moralism”, an approach to ethics that

generally refers to the Kantian rationalist tendency to reduce Christianity to the dimensions of an ethical framework, or to equate faith with obeying a law (Rowland 2008:66).

In such an approach, Christianity becomes Pelagian; and we are thought to be saved by the good that we do and by the obedience that we practice (Rowland 2008:66, drawing on a text of Lorenzo Albacete). Ratzinger, ever nervous of any flavour of works-righteousness, takes a completely different line, suggesting that being a Christian arises through an encounter – an encounter and an on-going relationship with Jesus Christ – and that it does not result from taking up a lofty idea or making an ethical choice. In the opening paragraph of *Deus Caritas Est*, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s first encyclical letter (drawn attention to in Rowland 2008), he states:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction (2005).

This is vintage Ratzinger/Benedict – his most mature thought. But I remember reading, in one of his earliest works, words similar to the above. He spoke simply of the Christian as having love (Ratzinger 1965:95), a love that we do not give ourselves but that is bestowed through encounter with the one who is all love. He made it clear that he was not talking here about an *adequate* love – in us it will always be lacking – but, he quickly added, this is where *faith* comes in because it

means, fundamentally, nothing other than that this deficit of our love, which we all have, has been made up by the abundance of the love of Jesus Christ that stands in for it (Ratzinger 1965:98).

Ratzinger’s basic point was – back in the mid-1960s also, forty years before the first encyclical letter of Benedict XVI on love appeared – that we must be careful to recognize on whom it is that we depend and avoid all suggestion of adequacy on our own parts. His talk of love may have many different nuances to that of Luther (or Calvin), of course, but it hardly amounts to works-righteousness.

I am aware that one can be simplistic about the Reformation and that care must be taken not to reduce it to its more memorable *dicta*. I certainly do not wish to do that, not least when I recall its elimination of any role for “works” in the matter of salvation. Nevertheless it is fair to say that, for

the great Reformation figures – Luther, Calvin – insistence on a salvation that depended utterly on God’s mercy and not at all on human efforts was paramount. Indeed, from what we know of their contexts, such insistence was vital. And to attribute it to Ratzinger today also is equally vital because it echoes throughout his theology, fashioned, as this was, in the context and presence of his neighbouring, Reformed theologians. Sometimes they – and he – are accused of an approach to humanity and the human world that is very rejecting, very pessimistic, and this pessimism is attributed, perhaps too easily, to the Augustinian heritage on which they draw. Ruth Whelan allows “that Calvin opens the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a damning indictment of our humanity” but says that when he speaks of our “turpitude” (often translated into English as “corruption” or “depravity”) “it is important to replace Calvin’s damning indictment of our ‘turpitude’ in the context of his time” (Whelan 2010: 40). And that context was one of *fear*, and of an enormous sense of inadequacy, on the part of people. Calvin wanted to take these things seriously, to speak to people where they were, but his pastoral purpose in so doing was to move them to rely on the unconditional mercy of God and to free them from the tyranny of thinking that there was anything that they could do to save themselves (Whelan 2010: 40-41). Joseph Ratzinger would not disagree.

4.2 The theology of politics

So much for so-called “Augustinian pessimism”, often said to be Calvinist (*and*, more often lately, Ratzingerian!). Leaving that aside, what is clear, however, is that, according to Joseph Ratzinger’s anthropological perspective, we human beings, left on our own, would not amount to much. Thus there can be no over-confident talk about our *making* our own future, bringing about a just society, producing the “new man” and the future made by our own hands (Ratzinger 1970:81-83; also Corkery 2009:40-41, 53 and 55-56). Yet political (and liberation) theologies are built on such ideas, Ratzinger is convinced (Ratzinger 1986(b):48-49); hence his robust opposition to them. One good example – and one on which Ratzinger has spilled a lot of ink – is found in his writing about the theology of the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez. In an essay on his 1971 book, *A Theology of Liberation*, which Ratzinger describes as a “paving the way” work that made the expression “theology of liberation” popular and gave it its contours (Ratzinger 1986:7), he reproaches the Peruvian with a mixing together – the German word is *Verschmelzung* – of theology and politics that, in its failure to distinguish the two domains properly, conceives Christian salvation in terms of a *praxis* of social engagement/revolution that will result in a “utopia”, a state of inner-historical well-being

(Ratzinger 1986; Corkery 2009:76ff.). While Gutierrez makes, initially, the necessary distinction between the theological and the political levels, this is lost with his interpretation of Jesus in the following words:

For Jesus the liberation of the Jewish people is nothing other than an aspect of a universal and permanent revolution (Ratzinger 1986:14).¹⁰

Ratzinger comments:

Now at this point the theological line in the thought of Gutierrez meets definitively with his political objectives: history is anthropophany; the situation of the man of today is determined according to the model of the man of tomorrow – with the certainty that man will overcome the present and will enter into a new era, into a world that he himself has created. In this creating of the new world man shapes and creates himself (Ratzinger 1986:14).¹¹

This is an expression of “makeability”, indeed of “salvation by works”, from which everything in Ratzinger must shrink. Christian Schäfer explains:

Here the idea of the redemption of man through a historical act surfaces: redemption is no longer a Christian, nor even a religious, concept; redemption is the success-stage (*Gelingenstadium*) of historically self-organized human life reached through liberation (Schäfer 2005:419).

There is a Pelagianism here with which Ratzinger could never be happy. Luther’s polemic against ‘works’ and, indeed, Calvin’s reminders that salvation is a matter of the sovereign mercy of God alone, can hardly be far from his mind, even if he would not be in agreement with either of them on all points in this regard (Ratzinger 1988(c):111; Corkery 2009:64, 68).

As I have written elsewhere, I am not in agreement with all that Ratzinger has said – and done – in relation to liberation theology (Corkery 2009:65-68, 74-80 and 2009(b):198-202) but what I have wished to allude to in the above is how, influenced by the Reformation polemic against any linking of salvation to “works”, Ratzinger was tilted against liberation theology from the outset. Added to this was, from his studies of Bonaventure’s theology of history, an awareness of the danger of looking forward to any form of inner-worldly salvific state – in other words, any form of utopia (Ratzinger

10 Ratzinger is citing p. 223 of the German edition of Gutierrez’s book; the translation is mine.

11 Here Ratzinger is referring to pp. 197 and 147 of Gutierrez’s *Theologie der Befreiung*.

1971; Corkery 2009(b) and Kissler 2005:155ff.). Towards working for the future, Ratzinger believes, we must “do what we can”, conscious that it is God, not we, who brings it about. We are just of penultimate significance.

4.3 Ecumenism

I mentioned the influence, from Bonaventure, that makes Ratzinger wary of any talk about immanent salvation, about inner-worldly states of well-being. In his day, Bonaventure, against the background of Joachim of Fiore’s “utopian” vision and the influence of this on many of Bonaventure’s own confreres, had to negotiate a path between what could be legitimately held about the future and any immanent notions of that future envisaged by the Calabrian abbot and his followers. For Ratzinger, the student of Bonaventure’s theology of history seven hundred years later, the emphasis settled decidedly on a wariness about all inner-worldly salvific states (Corkery 2009(b):196-197). Ratzinger was conscious that these fragile arrangements would depend on human agreement, always, to maintain and support them, and that such could be “interrupted” by the decisions of persons at any time to do just the opposite. Hence his insistence that any human contribution is always no more than a “doing what we can” and that a mentality of “making” is misleading in relation to future plans and projects. He applies this insight relentlessly whenever the matter of the creation of any just social order comes up. It surprised me – when I discovered it – to see that he applies it to the matter of *ecumenism* as well.

In 1986, having been invited by Professor Max Seckler, editor (at that time) of the journal, *Tübinger Theologische Quartalschrift*, to outline his ideas about the progress of ecumenism, Ratzinger said that Christian unity could never come about simply through agreed or negotiated statements that, however valuable, proceeded always “on the level of human (scholarly) insight” that fell short of the level of the act of faith itself, even if they did “provide essential conditions” for it. He said that it was important here

to recognize the limits of what one might term the ‘ecumenism of negotiation’ and not to expect of it any more than it can provide: rapprochements in important human fields, but not unity itself. (Ratzinger 1988(b):138).

In the background here was Ratzinger’s concern that ecumenical successes in the heady period immediately after the Second Vatican Council might have led people to expect too much from deft negotiations on the parts of Church authorities or from learned persons such as the theologians, Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries, whose 1983 proposals

regarding the unity of the Churches he once spoke about as “[A] forced march towards unity” (Ratzinger 1988(c):108 and 1988(b):138). The fear of unity by human effort – unity by means of “works” – was lurking too, as the following remark confirms:

In any case it should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs (Ratzinger 1988(b):140).

5. FINAL NOTE

In the end it is clear: while Ratzinger does not advise inactivity, he is ever mindful that activity does not produce the kingdom of God in any area. “Salvation” is never the product of human ‘works’: not in our attempts at a personal following of Jesus in lives of Christian discipleship; not in our political involvement to contribute to a more just social order; and not (as has just been seen) in our efforts to achieve that unity of Christians for which the Lord himself prayed so earnestly (John 17:21). These things are God’s alone to give. What human beings can achieve is, at best, something of just penultimate significance.

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Keywords

Joseph Ratzinger

Reformation/Reformed

Faith and works

Catholicism/Catholic

Theology

Trefwoorde

Joseph Ratzinger

Reformasie/Gereformeerd

Geloof en werke

Katolisiteit/Katoliek

Teologie